

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems by *The Nation's* Prize Winners — and
others — — — — —

Wallace Stevens' "Harmonium" Reviewed — — —

The Poet in Secret — An Editorial — — — — —

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NUMBER 37

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Conflict

I

HOW many fires have I started in my blood
With scraps of pride and independence of the day,
That have burned out and left me cold,
And left your face upon the ash!

I can not go by water or through wood,
In peopled towns or any place at all,
But that my insufficient self is lost,
And I turn back defeated to your arms.

II

Though all my veins with yours should mingle,
(This is my desire, secret and denied!)
And those red rivers through you flow,
You would become like one of Eva's children,
I would be nothing then, I know!

III

I am afraid of you:
You are the flesh that has no strength, yet wins
Its way against the heavy-muscled wise,
When the guards sink down beside their spears,
Drunk with magnanimous wines.

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IV

You, inscrutable and alien,
Are like a phantom girl within a dream
Where earth and stars are mixed with lips and eyes,
To make an unfamiliar Paradise.

V

I must escape your tenderness and tears,
Or else my world of men becomes a smoky dust,
And all the efforts of this brain and hand
Drift like a haze above the ruined land,
Forever through the undistinguished years!

VI

I am afraid, yet in the end I see
There is the inevitable surrender,
If I would be wholly free.
You are remembering woman, with a purpose
Stronger than anything in me!

—*Scudder Middleton.*

Elegy in Dialogue

SEE . . . we find pathways

All over-grown,
Prod an old spider,
Turn a damp stone,
Until in a loop a spider spun
We start at a silver skeleton.

This is death—this exquisite
Quiver of hollow coral . . . try,
The delicate thing is all awry—
Put it in order, gently, knit
These dangling stems together tight;
Put on the flesh; put in the light;
Peer at the wee imagined face;
Pretend you cannot—pretend you can
Start a little thud in the skeleton man.

So we shall struggle—you or I:

One of us will shortly die
And leave the other alone in the end,
Stunned, too weary to pretend.

Dear, this is not death! This delicate tangle,
Caprice of bones at an uneasy angle—
This is the trellis frame beneath
The bruised and crumbling spray of death:

Death is a reckless lunge—a sprawl
Of naked limbs on a narrow wall.

So shall we struggle, you or I.

One of us will shortly die
And leave the other a callow mask—
An idiot smile to remember by,
And a granite body to conjure and turn.

Against such massive unconcern
One will labor; the other lie—
Christ—so quiet . . .

Tell me why . . .

—*Genevieve Taggard*

Youth

THE old men talked of Barney's place
Two miles or so away,
Near a gray, half-tumbled wharf whose face
Abutted on the bay:
There Barney sold big jugs of rum
Before my dog was born,
And there gay sailors used to come
And dance and drink till morn.

They talked of Shepherd's Island four
Or five miles up the reach,
Where the squire shipped each May a score
Of lambs to roam the beach:
The older boys hauled up the sail
On a pinkey painted blue,
And left me standing sadly pale,
Too young to join the crew.

And since those yarns Bohemian ease,
With dancing, wit, and wine,
And voyages from Arctic seas
To Egypt have been mine:
But never has Parisian flair
Yet challenged Barney's style
Successfully, nor landscapes fair
Flash glints like Shepherd's Isle.

—*Wilbert Snow.*

Modern Man

A BAYONET is bored to lie
Idle in an armory:
It longs with all its length to feel
A bath of blood about its steel.

A tawny tiger in a cage
Stifles an agony of rage:
It longs to batter iron and wood
And feel its teeth meet hot in blood.

The lightning in its cloudy sponge
Longs for the hour when it may plunge
Its sultry torches down to Earth
And kindle fire to crimson birth.

*(God! I wish — I wish I knew
What it is I long to do!)*

Prisoners

EACH of us is like a man
In a dungeon, who can creep
For the length of eighty stones—
Wall of Sleep, to Wall of Sleep.

Even the great World itself—
Golden lion in narrow bars—
Turns and turns and turns again,
Shut within a cage of stars!

“Co’ Boss”

“CO ’Boss, Co’ Boss!” he calls
Across the heaped stone-walls.
The brown, deliberate cows
Stare as he shouts, then browse
With placid deep-lunged “Whoofs!”
And calm, unhurrying hoofs.

“Co’ Boss, Co’ Boss!” he calls;
And now a birch bar falls—
He drops the long bars down
To let the browsing brown
Rich-uddered Jerseys thru:
But they stand still and chew.

“Co’ Boss, Co’ Boss!” And now
At last a single cow
Obeys his sultry shout
And ambles bawling out;
Then out (quite nonchalantly)
Sidle the other three.

Each night, since he was eight,
He’s called cows thru this gate
And he is fifty now—
This servant of a cow.
He’ll call “Co’ Boss” until
Mould chokes his old mouth still:
Then other men will call
“Co’ Boss” across the wall.

Pessimists

WHAT if the oak should ask
The meaning of his task?
Why should he turn the dark
Earth into silver bark?
Why bear upon his twigs
Acorns, not plums and figs?
Why pour his life in boughs,
Not horns and eyes like cows?
Why should he gnarl his limbs
At the wind's crooked whims?

What if the rose should question
Tyrannous June's suggestion?
Why drink cold rain, and eat
Mould through her buried feet?
Why fix her roots so firm
Down with the pallid worm?
Why bear her gorgeous bloom
To suffer vase-doom?
Why (slave to earthen laws)
Cherish her crimson haws
Just so a child to come
In the Millennium
May thrill his little nose
With a red, torn rose?

Birth

THE grain of corn within the Earth
Knows well the agony of birth:
It lies with stones for bed-fellows
In mould still damp with perished snows;
It feels the dusky breathless dirt
Heaped on it, and must lie inert
Until the pallid raindrops swell
Its golden heart, and break its shell.
Then in slow anguish it must thrust
Its pale head upward through the crust
Of the oblivious Earth, and send
Thin thrusts of its own life to rend
Food from the sunless, quiet, profound
Stony abysses of the ground.
It has the fungus mould to eat,
And damp pink earthworms at its feet.
So my soul lies, in darker earth,
A seed in agony of birth,
Waiting, half hopeless, to be born
As golden, tassel-whispering corn!

—*E. Merrill Root.*

Spring Death

THE orifice of speech is closed;
The lips of intellect are still;
And what once sound with sound opposed
Is emptied now of will.

The stream strikes silver stones together;
The new birds carol in the field;
Articulate the March moved weather;
Only the mouth is sealed.

—*Kenneth Slade Alling.*

Before Storm

NOW the tawny unicorn
Beats a path around the moon,
And on the ashen air is borne
A twanging little tune,
A sudden lonely hollow note
A lofty pool of pausing sound,
Where hot and numb the shadows float
Upward from the ground.
Across the misty moor there flies
Pale as snow and thin as air
With a ghost in both his eyes
A solitary hare.

The Unicorn and the Hippogrif

PITY the Unicorn
Pity the Hippogrif,
Souls that were never born
Out of the land of If!

One has a golden horn,
One, they say, is golden shod,
Both have the lasting scorn
Of the animals of God!

One has an eye of fire,
One a misty silver wing,
Neither folk on earth would hire
Or buy for anything.

One pastures on the sun,
The other on the moon,
I think the earth will neither one
Visit very soon!

The Farmer's Wife

HE will not hear the cuckoo call,
The last faint snow will seal his eyes,
I will see a lone star fall
Above the bare pine ere he dies.

My own heart and the clock will soon
Alone keep all the silence here—
Unless the foolish, crying loon
Or the chanting wind come near.

He will not hold the soil again
In his two hands, not will his face
Lift to the power of the rain
That early April brings this place.

To the south his orchard lies,
His naked wheat-field to the west.
And well will *they* know when he dies
He loved me only second best.

—*Martha Ostenso.*

Off to College

SHE climbed into the wagon,
Bud roped the trunk on tight,
She rode beside her pappy
In the green twilight,

Down the mountain pathway;
Turning, she could see,
Single cabin chimney,
Puffing lonesomely.

Her eyes were on the strange spires,
Far away and dense,
But all the while, her shadow ran
Clinging to the fence.

That miracle beyond the crest,
She was soon to know;
But when they jogged around the bend,
Her shadow would not go.

—*Josephine Pollitt.*

Sweet Elysium

UP jumped Pollyanna, ever ready,
And halted Mary Baker Eddy.
"Oh tell me do" she sweetly said,
"Oh ar'n't you *glad* that you are dead?"

—*E. Louise Lauder.*

A CORRECTION

DEAR EDITORS:

May I ask you to print a correction in the title of my poem which appeared in your January issue? It should have been called "To the Younger Ones," but by some error I see it has been printed "To the Younger Set." I should not bother you about this seemingly slight change, if it did not happen to alter the whole intent of the poem; narrowing it from the speech of the revolutionist to the generation enjoying the fruits of revolution, to a reproach (which the *Times*, in copying it, points out at length) to what are called the "younger generation" of poets: which is an excursion into personalities that I never intended.

Yours very sincerely,
MARGARET WIDDEMER

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The Poet In Secret

“A T times I almost believe I'll give up writing. I can never get any poems published, but that is a small matter. There is almost no one in the world to whom what I write seems to mean anything vital; that's the devil of it. And poetry, here in America, seems to be such an artificial thing. I mean that everything and everyone connected with poetry seems artificial and clever and scheming and personal. No one seems to know that poetry is life. Or that it is a passion. Or that it is holy. I would dread to get anything published if I could. So I write because I like to, and enjoy it; but always feel a wistful desire to know that sometimes I do something that touches the life and heart of someone else; and never get what I desire.”

These words, by a poet whom we are publishing herewith, make us feel like issuing a manifesto addressed to all those who are capable of being possessed by a kindred emotion. We do not agree that it is a small matter for a real poet not to get anything published; we find it serious indeed when poets begin to cultivate a “dread” of publication and retire defensively into a Dickinsonian solitude.

In spite of Miss Lowell's encouraging remarks that the younger group are fortunate to the extent of having an audience ready made to their liking and a number of magazines ready to welcome them, apparently quite the reverse is true. There are of course, plenty of magazines of verse, nearly a score, in fact, and yet whether they are truly and actively hospitable to vital living verse, we seriously doubt. The least savor of sex, for example, is sufficient to scare most lady-editors screeching up a tree: and "Yes, but why write about Death?" suggests one rejection-slip. It is no wonder, under these circumstances, that the vast majority of our competent magazine verses deals with inanimate nature and Beauty with a capital B. Rube Goldberg could very well make up our cover designs with "Yes, but it doesn't mean anything."

Of course we know too well that our offices are swamped with the wrong kind of verse. Perhaps that is a prodromal symptom of a great literary renaissance, or perhaps it is merely a contemporary hydrocephalic tendency; we do not know. But we do know that in wading through reams of such manuscripts and selecting the least impossible for monthly publication, we are not doing our job. We must find and encourage and develop poets, if we have the necessary patience and intelligence: and if we have not, then let us forswear our priesthood and compile our anthologies, and tub-thump for our friends, and self-print our verses in some other name than that of editors of poetry. What excuse have we for our existence if we are driving poets underground rather than keeping them in the light or bringing them to the light?

It is too bad that we can offer no economic encouragement to the despairing poet. The profession ought to be a self-supporting one: it is not. The least we can do is to avoid the pettifoggeries: we will not, for example, maintain sonnet contests, for subscribers only, nor yet resort to the lesser blackmail of enclosing subscription blanks with rejection slips. No: we frankly prefer an open and unashamed beggary as more decent, more honorable, and more in accord with the high traditions of the profession. It is with mendicant hearts that we appeal to poets and patrons alike, to let us have of their very best. We need all that they can give us.

—*Rolfe Humphries.*

The Word of Music

Harmonium, by Wallace Stevens. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, \$2.00.

In spite of a rather fatuous jacket blurb *Harmonium* stands as one of a very few volumes of certain poetry to be issued during the past rather depressing literary year. Elinor Wylie's *Black Armour*, Edna Millay's *Harp Weaver and Other Poems*, Louise Bogan's *Body of This Death* and E. E. Cumming's *Tulips and Chimneys* are the only others which come to my mind. *Harmonium* is like none of them. It is not so much emotional as it is formal. It is very fine art. There will always be considerable divergence, among serious and not so serious thinkers, of those paths which lead toward the highly improbable goal of a critical standard. There will be much difference of opinion as to *Harmonium*, as to the thickness of the strata in which Mr. Stevens' metal is to be found. It may be wise then to establish some arbitrary standard of measurement for his output.

Mr. Stevens, either consciously or unconsciously, believes that words uttered or written may have a value separate from their meaning in terms of human speech. When it is considered that *yaitzo* and egg, very different sounds indeed, have exactly the same meaning, the one in Russian and the other in English, it may be agreed that the actual significance of sound cannot universally be in its use in any given language. It is not, therefore, stretching the point to any dangerous degree, to say that there is, in syllables written and pronounced, a sense value differing from, if not entirely independent of, their meaning to the literate mind. After all it is the illiterate portion of the mind which covets the subtler music of the world. I feel that Mr. Stevens has addressed himself to this covetousness with conspicuous success.

There is a fineness of tone in the poems of *Harmonium*, poems for the most part well known to the followers of those strange and wonderful journals which print the verse of our day, which knits up the loose phrases of intentional language into a cloth which by quite a little surpasses our ability to describe it. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" which has been well known for years is to my way of thinking one of the finest and most significant gestures of modern poetry,—

would be unquestionably so but for the fact that it is very far from being essentially modern. Mr. Stevens is an artist primarily. He achieves form and a definite mastery of color, albeit he leans more noticeably toward one half of the spectrum than toward the other. He does not bother much with reality, he does not preach nor inform, and best of all he does not indulge in that trifling though annoying habit of bourgeoisie-baiting which demeans the stature of some of his nearest rivals. Mr. Stevens can afford not to mention things.

I have a feeling that it would be quite useless to try to give an impression of *Harmonium* by quoting scattered fragments from it. If any one cares for distinction of phrase, for broken and well managed light across the rich floor of a mysterious darkness, for echoes of original cellular music, let him take the book and suffer it to swim across him. He need not be too conscious of the fact that Mr. Stevens is occasionally shaken from his command of his art into a state in which he is content with the *tour de force* and the smart absurdity. All poets hate themselves occasionally, but the best of them are not able to ruin themselves by including as published work the things which have written themselves in defiance of a momentary lapse.

—Raymond Holden

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